

The Cross and Conformity to Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

The cross of the Lord Jesus is essential to God's purpose of conforming believers to the image of His Son, dealing with sin, the natural man, and the old creation.

Scripture: Romans 6:6, Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 1 Corinthians 2:2, 2 Corinthians 4:10-11, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 2:20, Galatians 3:13-14, Galatians 5:24, Galatians 6:14

Topics: "The Cross", "Conformity to Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the centrality of the cross in the believer's journey towards conformity to the image of Christ, explaining that the cross addresses both the sin problem and the natural man's limitations. He highlights that through the cross, believers are not only freed from sin but also transformed into a new creation, enabling them to live by the Spirit rather than by the flesh. Sparks discusses how the cross serves as a dividing line between the old and new creations, urging believers to embrace their identity in Christ and to live out their faith in a way that reflects His character. He concludes by stressing that true value lies not in worldly success but in the measure of Christ formed in believers, as they maintain their relationship with the cross.

Transcript

Reading: Romans 6.

"What we in glory soon shall be

It doth not yet appear;

But when our blessed Lord we see

We shall His image bear."

["Behold, What Love" by M.S. Sullivan]

The words upon which we have based our meditations correspond with those words. "The earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God"; "Conformed to the image of his Son"; "We shall His image bear". We have covered a great deal of ground in connection with divine thought and purpose, passing through four of the letters of the apostle Paul.

In all of those letters there is one note struck upon which we have not dwelt particularly, although we have mentioned it from time to time, and it is that of the cross of Christ; and to go on from this time without recognising the place of the cross, in relation to God's purpose of conforming us to the image of His Son, would be to make the greatest of mistakes and to leave out the most fundamental thing. We will, therefore, briefly consider its place in these four letters of the apostle Paul, from Romans to Galatians. That does not mean that we are going to deal with every reference to the cross in each letter, but rather with the place given to it and its specific connection in each letter.

The Cross in Relation to Sin

It is quite clear that the place of the cross in the letter to the Romans is its relation to the whole question of sin, and until that matter is settled there is no prospect whatever of conformity to the image of God's Son. Now the terms used here make it abundantly plain that it is a matter which is settled once for all. It is something that is done at the beginning. But let us hasten to point out that it is not sins that are being dealt with. Sins are not the subject, but sin.

Leading up to this chapter the whole question of sin and righteousness has been under review, and there has been a search through the universe for righteousness in man as man's nature. That search has extended through the whole pagan world, and then to the whole Jewish world, and when all the ground of Jew and Gentile has been surveyed the verdict is that, not only is man not righteous, but that he is unrighteous by nature. "There is none righteous, no not one". So that all men are by nature included under unrighteousness. There is, therefore, no foundation upon which God can build His purpose; for God must have a foundation suited to that purpose. If it is His purpose that the image of His Son should be reproduced in men and women, in a creation, then the foundation thing surely must be righteousness; for that is where you begin with the character of Jesus Christ, the nature of Christ. It is a matter of righteousness. How, then, shall God provide Himself with an essential basis without which He is defeated in His purpose? God sent His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and, related thus to the unrighteous race, He was made sin. He took the unrighteous nature of man upon Him in His cross, in a representative way, although in Himself there was no sin. But as the substitute and representative of a race that is condemned, judged and lying under death, He, as a racial, inclusive representative, died under the hand of divine judgment, and in Him the race was caused to die from God's standpoint. That is how God views it. In Him sin is dealt with, unrighteousness is put away. In His resurrection He was "raised from the dead by the glory of the Father". There is no glory except where there is righteousness. In His resurrection you have a representative righteous one, as in His death you have a representative unrighteous one. In His death He is offered a substitute for the sinner; in His resurrection He is presented a substitute for the believer, for the saint. Now the challenge is, Who is righteous?

The whole of the argument in this letter to the Romans, as you know, has to do with that righteousness which is by faith in Jesus Christ. That is, as to whether, on the one hand, we will exercise faith toward Jesus Christ as our substitute in death, in judgment, under the hand of God for destruction, and will lay our hands upon His head in faith and say, That is for me, for my sin, that is my judgment, my death; and on the other hand, as to whether, viewing Him as risen, with sin all done away, we will by faith lay our hands upon His head and say, This Righteous One is accepted for me, this one is my representative before God, His righteousness is mine. That is exercising faith in Jesus Christ and God accounts His righteousness ours, places it to our credit, and so the sin question is done away in the death and burial of the Lord Jesus. As we identify ourselves by faith with Him in death and burial, we are found where the whole body of sin is done away, and then, as by faith we identify ourselves with Him in resurrection, the whole body of

righteousness abounds, and we are accounted righteous by God.

That is the simple element of the gospel. You are familiar with that, but that is where God begins, and that is the foundation. In the cross the whole body of sin, that which was interfering with God in the realisation of His purpose, is put away from God's sight. God Himself has put it away, and God has brought in righteousness by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and in that way provided Himself with the ground upon which to take up His work, His purpose of conforming believers to the image of His Son.

It is important, then, for us to recognise that the whole sin question was settled, the whole body of sin was done away in Jesus Christ, and by faith accept that position, as also that the whole body of righteousness in Jesus Christ has been brought into view with God in resurrection, and that this is for such as will believe. We are accounted righteous before God by faith in Jesus Christ. Until that is settled we can get nowhere. While we have questions about that, God cannot go on with the conforming. That is why we said the question at issue is not that of sins but sin. We shall find, after that we have reached settlement on the matter, that there are elements of that old creation still about us, but that now God begins upon the basis of righteousness to deal with those, to conform us to the image of His Son, so that righteousness overcomes unrighteousness, and the nature of the Lord Jesus overcomes the old nature. But the essential beginning of God's operations is that we accept the whole as already accomplished in His Son, Jesus Christ. It is as though God were taking from the full and the final store which is in the person of His Son and making that good for us as we exercise faith in Him.

We need not say more about the letter to the Romans. It may be that some have not yet got past Romans 6. Well, the call is very clear, the position is unmistakable. The apostle says that this position can be taken in faith, and baptism is the way in which testimony is borne to the fact that we have taken that position. In our baptism we took the position of declaring that we were planted together with Him in His death, and are also united with Him in the likeness of His resurrection. That is where we begin. We have righteousness to begin with, God's essential foundation. If ever you get back behind that you arrest the work of God. If ever you have questions again about your standing before God on the basis of divine righteousness, you at once put God's hand from you in the conforming of you to the image of His Son, but while you take that position of faith, God's hand can do it. Do not argue about it; do not have all sorts of questions about it; do not allow the mere psychological elements to come into it, which say, "Well, is this trying to make ourselves believe something, an endeavour to take a position which is not actual and real?" Because we mentally take that position it is as a kind of subjective fact in us. Do not allow all that realm to come in, for it will certainly do so if you allow it. If you will positively and definitely reckon yourself, with regard to the sinful body of the flesh, to have been taken to death in the person of Christ, and if you will positively and definitely by faith reckon Christ's righteousness as yours, then God says, I will make that good to you, and will go on working in you towards My full end. You do the reckoning, and I will do the working, God says. You operate in faith, and I will operate in work. Thus God works on the basis of a settled thing in our hearts through faith. It is possible that we shall meet everything that can counter this possibly, as did Luther, the great exponent of this very truth of the letter to the Romans. He was continuously pursued by the enemy, who sought to bring him again under accusation and condemnation, but he always cleared himself by a strong and positive affirmation, right in the very face of Satan, that in Christ no sin was attributed to him; he was righteous. Thus it was he found the victory. That is to be our position; not to argue with the devil but to tell him the truth: and this is the truth, that in Christ we are by God regarded as sinless. We must honour Christ as our representative.

The Cross and the Natural Man

We pass from Romans to the first letter to the Corinthians, and here in chapter 2 verse 2 we have our reference to the cross: "For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified".

That is a definite resolution, a determination. When Paul says a thing like that, he has made up his mind to take a certain position, and we may be sure that he has very good reason for doing it. The reason is perfectly patent as you read this letter. Here were believers in the Lord Jesus, Christians, who were nevertheless bringing into their Christian life all the elements of nature. These elements are very many, as the letter discloses. They are seeking to live in relation to the Lord Jesus on a basis of natural life, natural wisdom (that is the subject of chapters 2 and 3), natural strength; nature's preferences, nature's likes and nature's dislikes. The apostle does not say that they are unregenerate. He calls them the Lord's people, but he says of them that they are carnal; that is, fleshly Christians. They talk as men naturally talk. They think as men naturally think. They desire and choose, and select as do men naturally, and in every way they are doing what men do by nature. He sets that over against what men think, and say, and do, and feel, and desire, and select when spiritual. So he sets two men in opposition here, the natural man and the spiritual man. The one he calls the man of soul, the man of nature; the other he calls the man of spirit, the spiritual man. The word used for the latter is a very interesting word when you break it up -- "pneumatikos" man. "Eikos" is likeness, form; an icon is a form, a likeness, an image. "Pneuma" is spirit. So that the word you have when you piece it together is "formed after the spirit", or "made suitable to what is spiritual". The other man is formed after nature, after the soul. Now that is why Paul determined not to know anything amongst them that was merely natural knowledge. That is to say, he was not coming down to their level, that everything should be known by natural ways on a natural basis. He saw that this was ruining the interests of the Lord in their life and destroying their testimony. Ah, but he knew this, that the cross of the Lord Jesus had not only dealt with the whole sin problem, but also with the whole problem of man himself. The natural-man question was settled as well as the sin question. In the death of the Lord Jesus, not only had man died as a sinner, but he had died as a man, a kind of being, a sort of creature who thinks like this, who speaks like this, who feels like this, who likes like this, who chooses like this. It is all according to nature, and in the cross of the Lord Jesus that man died, and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ another man, a man of spirit is brought in, who is spiritually minded, who thinks and desires and feels, not as natural men do, but as the Lord Jesus does: one who has the mind of Christ, who has the sensibilities of Christ, who has the inclinations of Christ, who has the tastes of Christ; and all that is so opposed to what you have here at Corinth.

The cross of the Lord Jesus, then, brings an end to a kind of man, namely, the natural man, and makes way for another man, a spiritual man. If you have any difficulties about that term "spiritual man" just remember the word means "one formed suitably to things spiritual". If you want to know what that is read on here: "Now the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God... he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things..." (1 Cor. 2:14-15). That is a man who is so constituted that by new divine faculties he is now capable of understanding divine things, and having communion with divine things, and living according to divine things. He is constituted, formed for that which is of God. The cross of the Lord Jesus cleaves between those two kinds of men. On the one hand it brings an end to the natural, and on the other hand it brings in the spiritual man. That is absolutely essential to God's end. God can never reach His end of conforming us to the image of His Son on natural grounds, in a natural man. If you and I come down on to that carnal level of life, so that we are thinking, feeling, speaking, desiring, choosing and acting upon a natural basis, God can get nowhere with us. That has all to be brought to an end. We are to be fashioned after the Spirit and the spiritual, and then God's

end lies full in view, conformity to the image of His Son.

The Cross, the Divide Between Two Creations

Now we pass to the second letter to the Corinthians, and we find our passage in chapter 5 verses 14-18. This is but an advance upon the position in the first letter. There we have seen that the cross brings in the spiritual man in the place of the natural man. The same thing is said here, but the matter is carried further, and enlarged. Its scope is now that of a whole creation. What is clearly before us here is this, that the individual believer through the cross of the Lord Jesus is constituted a new creation, a member of a spiritual creation, and that everything in this creation in a related way is spiritual; that is, there is a new race, and the natural relationships of all members of that new race are lifted up into the Spirit. The distinction is drawn between that which is after the flesh, and that which is after the Spirit; between anything that is according to the old creation and anything that is according to the new creation; and the cross stands between. "All died", says the apostle; but he says here that all died in Christ in relation to all others. Formerly we knew one another after the flesh, our relationships were carnal relationships, the relationships of an old creation, and we appraised one another according to old creation standards, we judged one another on an old creation basis, our relationships with one another were all along that level of nature, the old creation. Therefore, seeing we have all died in Christ, and have risen, on the new basis we no longer know one another after the flesh, but our relationships are brought into the Spirit; that is, we have been lifted into a new creation realm, into another creation and our fellowship has as its basis the fact that there is a new creation life in us. The fellowship of God's people would not exist five minutes if we were to drop on to the level of nature. It would be in fragments. What is it that holds the people of God together and makes up that very blessed fellowship which is one of the strongest testimonies to the victory of the cross of the Lord Jesus? It is the fact that they share one Spirit, a new creation life, where all is of God. The old things are passed away. We have to act on that basis. We have to adjust ourselves to it.

You notice that this second letter very clearly follows on the position of the first letter. In the first letter you have this: "Ye are carnal; and the proof that ye are carnal is this, that one says, I am of Paul! and another says, I am of Apollos! and another says, I am of Peter! When everyone says 'I', that proves ye are carnal". Is not that the very hallmark of the old creation? All our relationships in the old creation do secretly seem to be gathered round the "I" interest; just where we figure in the matter; how the thing affects us; what we are going to gain or lose; our satisfaction. If a person in the old creation does not like us we just wash our hands of them and say, "Well, all right, it does not matter, you can go." That is commonly how it affects us. If, on the other hand, people like us, then we hold these to ourselves. We like to be liked, and we have no interest in that which does not gratify that "I" in some form or another. It is shot through all our social relationships. It is shot through our commercial relationships. It is shot through the whole of the old creation. Somewhere you will find that "I" element which governs.

The apostle says that the cross of the Lord Jesus has brought an end to that, and our relationships are on a new basis altogether. No longer are the personal benefits from our relationships our consideration, but we know one another after the Spirit, and minister Christ to one another. You are no longer an object upon which I fasten my attention in order to get some benefit from you; my attention is directed towards you in order that I may be of help to you, may minister to you. You hate me; I love you all the more. You work against me; I will pray for you. That is the line of the new creation. It is a different kind of thing. Henceforth we know no man after the flesh.

I am not saying that we always live up to that level, but I am saying that is God's way of conforming to the image of His Son, and when you and I feel that the attitudes of others against us are tending to provoke us to revenge, we have to bring it to the cross, and say, Calvary forbids that. Whenever there is a provoking of what is of the old creation, we have at once to flee to the cross and see to it that it is dealt with then and there: for Calvary means that one died for all, therefore all died, and henceforth we know no man after the flesh.

The Cross and Two Spheres or Modes of Life

We will close with a word on Galatians. What a lot there is in Galatians on the cross. As we have said, there are four great references to the cross in the letter. Of these one passage is especially familiar to us: "For I through the law died unto the law, that I might live unto God. I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live; and yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me; and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me". (Gal. 2:19-20).

The cross of the Lord Jesus, in which I have been crucified! What is the connection of the cross there? It draws the line of distinction between two kinds of lives. You notice what the apostle is saying here. He is saying, in effect, "When I was under the law my quest was for life. I was reaching out for life. I wanted to live before God. I wanted to know what life in fellowship with God was, and in order to know that life of fellowship with God I pursued the law. I followed its injunctions minutely and carefully, I devoted myself to all its commands and its claims.

When the law said again and again, 'Thou shalt not', I sought to conform that I might know; and when the law said repeatedly 'Thou shalt', I did all that I could to see that I followed the law. But in my devotion to the law, as that law loomed before me and set such a standard, I discovered that the life in me was contrary to that law. The kind of life that was in me could not correspond with that law, but was always working to the contrary, so that the law became a burden I could not bear, something which ground me down.

Instead of saving me, it only made me feel how bad I was. Instead of bringing into life, it only made death a greater reality, because of the life that was in me. I had not the life in me that could reach to the end for which I was seeking, and stand up to God's requirements. The law awoke and I died. How was I to be saved? I shall only be saved if there is another life put into me. If another life is put in me then I shall not need to be told, 'Thou shalt', and, 'Thou shalt not'.

I shall have another standard altogether. If only I could have God's life then I should have God's nature, and no one need tell me, "Thou shalt", and, "Thou shalt not", and keep plying me with commandments. I should find that I had in me that which was of God Himself, another life, making everything possible". So the apostle saw the meaning of the cross. "The cross of Jesus Christ", he says, "meant the end of me in that old life, the end of that old very devoted life, that old life that could never get anywhere, that old life that could never stand up to God's requirements.

I was crucified with Christ to that life, and therefore, when that life died I died to that realm of things, to that law. Over a dead man no law can operate. Thus through death I escaped the law. But now I live, and yet not I but Christ lives in me; a new life, divine life, Christ Himself lives in me. That is what the cross of Christ has done for me. I had a life which was entirely and utterly incapable of bringing me to any position of rest and satisfaction. It was a life which was no life at all.

It was a living death, and I was kept conscious of the fact by the very presence of the law of God. Now, I died with Christ to that life, and died to that law, and I have been raised with Christ, and it is Christ that lives in me now, and by the indwelling life of Jesus Christ I have come to know what Christ is".

It is life upon which the apostle is placing the emphasis here. "That life which I now live in the flesh (THAT life) I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me". Blessed be God, that is the way of deliverance, the way of emancipation, the way of victory.

We must mention the other three references without dwelling upon them very much. Galatians 3:13-14 so much corresponds to what we have just said, that it would be almost like a reiteration. It is part of the same argument. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that upon the Gentiles might come the blessing of Abraham in Christ Jesus; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith". Here you have through the cross of the Lord Jesus not only a new life but a new power, and that power is nothing other than the personal presence of the Holy Spirit in the life. We spent much time on that in our last meditation, and need say no more about it, but simply that if the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Ghost, is resident within us on the basis of our resurrection-union with Christ, on the basis of what the death of Christ meant, then all God's purpose is made wonderfully, livingly possible. The Holy Spirit resident within will surely be the power by which we shall come to God's end. This quite naturally works out to the next point in chapter 5 verse 24. "And they that are of Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with the passions and the lusts thereof".

Here is the cross again, and in this connection it tells us that those who have been crucified with Christ, those who have come into that union with Him in His death and His burial and His resurrection, have a new disposition, "have crucified the flesh with the passions and lusts thereof". They have a disposition against all such things, and have things which are according to Christ. It is a new disposition, or, if you like, a new nature.

Finally, in chapter 6 verse 14: "But far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world hath been crucified unto me, and I unto the world".

It is interesting to notice the particular way in which the apostle speaks of the world here. That term is a very comprehensive term, and includes a very great deal. Here Paul gets right down to the spirit of the thing. You notice the context. It is well for us to take account of it. "For not even they who receive circumcision do themselves keep the law; but they desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh" (verse 13).

What does the apostle mean? They want to say, See how many proselytes we are making! See how many followers and disciples we are getting! See how successful our movement is! See what a power we are becoming in the world! See all the marks of divine blessing resting upon us! The apostle says, That is worldliness in principle and spirit; that is the world. He sets over against this his own clear spiritual position. Do I seek glory of men? Do I seek to be well-pleasing to men? No! The world is crucified to me and I to the world. All that sort of thing does not weigh with me. What weighs with me is not whether my movement is successful, whether I am getting a lot of followers, whether there are all the manifestations outwardly of success; what weighs with me is the measure of Christ in those with whom I have to do. It is wonderful how this at the end of the letter comes right back upon these Galatians, and the whole object of the letter. We recall the words in which that object is summed up. "My little children, for whom I am again

in travail, until Christ be formed in you".

Christ formed in you, that is my concern, he says, that is what weighs with me, not extensiveness, not bigness, not popularity, not keeping in with the world so that it is said that this is a successful ministry, and a successful movement. That is worldliness. I am dead to all that. I am crucified with Christ to all that. The thing that matters is Christ, the measure of Christ in you.

You see how the world can creep in, and how worldly we can become almost imperceptibly by taking account of things outwardly; of how men will think and talk, what they will say, the attitude they will take, of the measure of our popularity, the talk of our success. That is all the world, says the apostle, the spirit of the world, that is how the world talks. Those are values in the eyes of the world, but not in the eyes of the risen Christ. In the new creation, on the resurrection side of the cross, one thing alone determines value, and that is, the measure of Christ in everything. Nothing else is of value at all, however big the thing may be, however popular it may be, however men may talk favourably of it; on the resurrection side that does not count a little bit. What counts is how much of Christ there is.

You and I in the cross of the Lord Jesus must come to the place where we are crucified to all those other elements. Ah, you may be unpopular, and the work be very small; there may be no applause, and the world may despise, but in it all there may be something which is of Christ, and that is the thing upon which our hearts must be set. The Lord give us grace for that crucifixion. There are few things more difficult to bear than being despised; but He was despised and rejected of men. What a thing is in God's sight must be our standard. That is a resurrection standard. Now that is the victory of the cross. "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ..."

So you see that at every point the cross is related to God's full end, conformity to the image of His Son. The Holy Spirit must maintain the cross in operation in us, and we must maintain our attitude and relationship with the cross, to keep the way open and clear for God's end, the image of His Son.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/the-cross-and-conformity-to-christ/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net